

# Birdwatching at Midewin



The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights  
1400 Independence Avenue SW,  
Washington, D.C. 20250-9410  
or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or  
(202) 720-6382 (TDD).

USDA is an equal opportunity provider  
and employer.

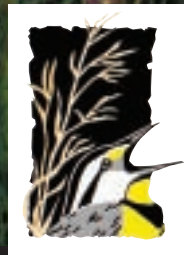
## **Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie**

**30239 S. State Route 53**

**Wilmington, IL 60481**

**(815) 423-6370**

**[www.fs.fed.us/mntp/](http://www.fs.fed.us/mntp/)**



Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

# Bird Watching

Bird watching or birding is a \$25 billion industry that was, according to a survey conducted by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, enjoyed by over 50 million Americans in the year 2001. Birding is an enjoyable activity that can be pursued anywhere, but birding “hotspots” make the activity especially exciting and rewarding. In northeastern Illinois, the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie is one such hotspot. Some of the species that make it so are featured in this brochure.

**What is birding?** It is observing and identifying wild birds in the field. Successful birding can be accomplished simply with binoculars, a field guide, and some determination. Of course, birding can also entail fancy and expensive gadgets, spotting scopes, photographic equipment, etc. Many sources of information about birding are now available, including books, magazines, and web sites. There are also many birding associations and bird clubs.

Many birders endorse the American Birding Association’s “Code of Birding Ethics.” At the core of this code is promotion of the welfare of birds and their environment, respect for the birds you observe, and respect for fellow birders. We encourage birders at Midewin to follow these simple precepts, especially:

- Stay on roads, trails, and paths, and minimize any habitat disturbance.
- Exercise restraint and caution during observation.
- Never tamper with bird nests, or their eggs or young.

The code can be found at:  
[www.americanbirding.org/abaethics.htm](http://www.americanbirding.org/abaethics.htm)

## Bird Species and Habitats at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

Midewin, only 40 miles southwest of Chicago, represents the largest contiguous holding of public lands in the greater Chicago region. As most of the property consists of large grassland fields, Midewin supports what is arguably the largest and most diverse community of grassland birds in northeastern Illinois. Analyses of long-term records of bird populations indicate that many grassland bird species have decreased alarmingly in population size over the last 30 years. Species of conservation concern include the bobolink, the grasshopper and Henslow’s sparrows, and the upland sandpiper. These species and many others have thriving populations at Midewin. For this reason, Midewin is both critically important for their continued survival and a superlative location for bird watching.

The birds that live at Midewin include some species, like the red-tailed hawk, common crow, blue jay, and northern mockingbird, that occur year-round. Other species, like the bobolink, grasshopper sparrow, and upland sandpiper, occur only during the breeding season (April/May to July/August), when they migrate from more southern locales, including the southern United States and Central and South America. Yet others, like the Tennessee warbler, are found only during either spring or fall migration. Finally, some species, such as the rough-legged hawk, northern shrike, and tree sparrow, are found only in the winter, when they have migrated south from Canada for our relatively warmer winter weather.

Like all birds, grassland birds respond to vegetation and not all grassland habitat is equally suitable. Some species, such as the grasshopper sparrow and the upland sandpiper, prefer short-stature grassland habitat. Other species, such as the bobolink and the Henslow’s sparrow, prefer taller-stature grasslands. To ensure habitation by the greatest diversity of grassland bird species, therefore, a variety of grassland habitats is necessary.

At Midewin, management and restoration activities have been designed to provide that variety of grassland habitats. In addition, Midewin also provides many other types of habitat, including wetlands, old fence rows with trees and shrubs, savanna-like habitat, and remnant oak woodlands. This mix of habitats ensures that a great variety of bird species call Midewin home throughout the year, including the breeding season, spring and fall migration, and during the winter.

# Bird Watching Habitats

## GRASSLANDS

Grasslands are just that—fields or areas dominated by grasses. At Midewin, most grass species were introduced from Europe for livestock pasture. In some of the grassland fields at Midewin, native plant species can be found, including big bluestem, prairie cord grass, black-eyed susan, and wild bergamot. In the future, many grassland fields at Midewin will be restored to native prairie habitat. But for now, some fields will remain in pasture grasses because this habitat is known to be suitable for some grassland bird species of conservation concern.

### Grasslands



## BRUSHY FIELDS & WOODY EDGES

Grassland habitat is often invaded by woody plant species leading to brushy or scrubby fields. At Midewin, woody plant invaders include shrubs like prairie and multiflora rose, and trees like hawthorn and osage orange. In addition, many large fields were divided in sections by fencerows and tree lines, creating woody edge habitat.

### Brushy Fields & Woody Edges



### Woodlands & Savannas



## WOODLANDS & SAVANNAS

Woodlands are dominated by trees. If the trees are scattered, the woodland is generally referred to as savanna. If the trees are dense, the woodland is referred to as forest. Midewin possesses remnant oak-dominated woodlands, some savanna and some forest. Savannas have a grassland or prairie plant community beneath and surrounding the scattered trees. Forest may have a more complicated structure, with a layer of canopy trees, a layer of sub-canopy trees and shrubs, and a layer of forest plant species on the ground.

### Wetlands



## WETLANDS

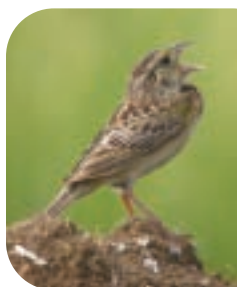
Wetlands are areas that are inundated by water often enough, but not necessarily year round, to support wetland plants or animals. At Midewin, wetland habitat includes ponds or open water wetlands; large marshes with cattails, reeds, and other plant species; and wet prairie/sedge meadow.



### UPLAND SANDPIPER

*Bartramia longicauda* (breeding)

Classified as endangered in Illinois, found in open grassland of short stature. Larger than killdeer, often perches on fenceposts. Note the long tail, short bill, and thin neck. Song a strange, windy whistle, first rising and then falling, *whheeee-loooooo*. Sexes similar in appearance. Most common in large grassy fields.



### GRASSHOPPER SPARROW

*Ammodramus savannarum* (breeding)

Small, somewhat secretive bird with short tail and flat head. From distance, appears rather dull, but plumage quite intricate close-up. Look for yellow shoulder; chestnut and black stripes on back, and pale median stripe on head. Flight appears weak. Often quite abundant at Midewin, found in short-stature grasslands, where male can often be seen perched on taller forb or small shrub, singing. Apparently feed heavily on grasshoppers in breeding season. Voice an insect-like buzz preceded by tik notes: *tik tuk zreeeeeeee* (somewhat slurred at times). Call a high, thin *tip* or *titip*.



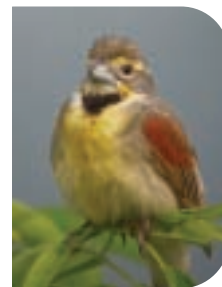
### LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE

*Lanius ludovicianus* (year-round, but breeding population separate from winter population) Look for the distinctive grey, black, and white plumage of this species in large fields with short grass and scattered trees, particularly osage orange. The white throat contrasts with black mask, grey back, and black wings with prominent white patch. Although a songbird, preys on large insects and small vertebrates, including birds, mammals, and amphibians. This species can be confused with northern mockingbird.

### DICKCISSEL

*Spiza americana* (breeding)

Suggestive of diminutive meadowlark. Sexually dimorphic with male having black V “bib” on yellow breast. Female lacks the black bib. Found in grassy fields with scattered small trees or small shrubs. Song loud, conspicuous recitation of name: *click click clickCISSEL*. Call note *chek*.



### EASTERN

### MEADOWLARK

*Sturnella magna* (breeding)

Chunky, brown bird with conspicuous black V “bib” on yellow breast, long bill. In flight, look for conspicuous white outer tail feathers. Often flicks tail open when walking. Found in large numbers throughout Midewin, often from February through late fall. Song of lovely but simple, clear, slurred whistles, *seee-ohaaa seeeahyair*. Call a distinctive, sharp, raspy *dziit* and mechanical rattle, *zttttttt*.



### KILLDEER

*Charadrius vociferus* (breeding)

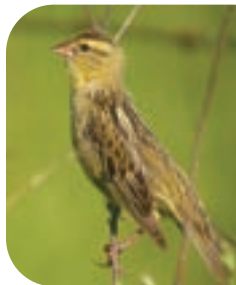
A conspicuous bird of farm country; abundant throughout Midewin, arriving in very early spring. This medium-sized, long-winged shorebird has a brownish cap and back, white breast, with two easily-observed black breast bands. Killdeer nest on ground, creating a small scrape in which their four very-well camouflaged eggs are laid. Young are downy and capable shortly after hatching. Sexes are similar in appearance, and young resemble parents except for size and a single breast band. When the nest or young is approached, the adults exhibit a “distraction (broken wing) display” in which they attempt to lure the threat away from the nest or young. Voice a loud, high, repeated *kill-DEER*.





#### BOBOLINK

*Dolichonyx oryzivorus* (breeding). Sexually dimorphic, with male largely black with striking yellow or straw-colored nape and white rump and scapulars; female a pale yellow buff with dark stripes on crown and back. A strong flier; males often seen in chase-pursuit of females. Typically found in fields of medium to tall-stature grasses and hay fields. A species of conservation concern due to declining populations, Midewin provides important habitat for large breeding population. Song is enthusiastic, bubbling warble, difficult to describe but distinctive and unique. Call a low *chuk*.



#### SEDGE WREN

*Cistothorus platensis* (breeding). A very small, secretive bird of tall-stature grassy fields with scattered shrubs. Hard to see, but look for thin, slightly recurved bill, and upright, cocked tail. Song of sharp, staccato chips followed by unmusical trill.



#### HENSLOW'S SPARROW

*Ammodramus henslowii* (breeding). Small, secretive pale brown bird of medium to tall-stature grasslands with scattered shrubs. Note white throat-patch under bill rimmed by lateral dark strip, and narrow breast band of fine streaks. Classified as endangered in Illinois, but fairly abundant in taller grassy fields at Midewin and at Goose Lake Prairie. Song a dry, insect-like *tsliik*, very faint and difficult to hear. Call a sharp *tsik*.



#### SHORT-EARED OWL

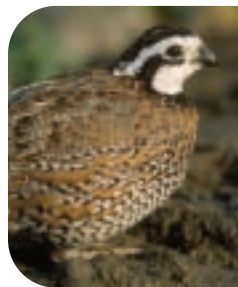
*Asio flammeus* (non-breeding). Classified as endangered in Illinois, this uncommon, medium-sized owl is typically found in large fields or marshes with medium to tall vegetation. Sexes similar. Note yellow eyes and dark bill. Upperparts mottled brown and white, with tawny breast with darker streaks fading to a white belly. Short ear tufts not always apparent. In flight, look for the pale underwings with prominent black wrist marks. Flight described as "floppy" and moth-like. Seldom vocalizes, but described as high, nasal, wheezy barks.



#### NORTHERN HARRIER

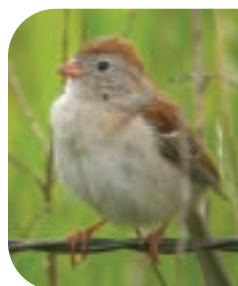
*Circus cyaneus* (year-round). Sexually dimorphic, with male bluish grey and female streaked brown; both have prominent white rump and owl-like facial disc. Glides buoyantly over fields and marshes, hunting for small mammals (voles are preferred prey) and birds.





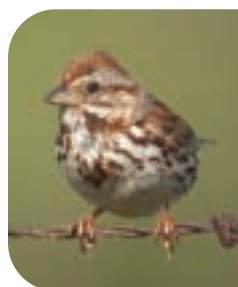
## NORTHERN BOBWHITE

*Colinus virginianus* (year-round). Secretive and heard more often than seen in brushy fields and woods borders. Male song a clear whistle *bob WHITE*. Male has striking head pattern with rufous cap, white line above eye, and white throat.



## FIELD SPARROW

*Spizella pusilla* (year-round). Typically one of the most abundant birds found in brushy grasslands. Sexes similar. Note the clear breast, pink bill, rusty crown, and white eye ring. Juveniles have lightly streaked breast. Song an accelerating series of whistles, reminiscent of a ping-pong ball bouncing on table. Call is a distinctive *chip*. While most often found nesting in shrubs or small trees, some nests are placed on ground.

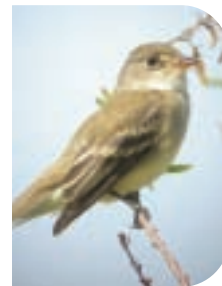


## SONG SPARROW

*Melospiza melodia* (year-round). Common in brushy fields, often near low, wet ground or open water. Sexes similar. Note heavily-streaked breast with prominent central breast spot, and brown and gray stripes on crown. Song rather complex and attractive, generally beginning with about three short notes followed by a variable series of trills.

## WILLOW FLYCATCHER

*Empidonax traillii* (breeding). A rather dull, grayish bird found commonly in brushy fields. Note upright posture, paired wing bars and narrow eye ring. Voice a distinctive *fitzpew*, with the accent usually on the second syllable.



## BELL'S VIREO

*Vireo bellii* (breeding). A small, but conspicuous bird of scrubby habitat with dense, but scattered shrubs. Sexes have similar plumage. Look for broken eye-ring, two light wing bars, and yellowish plumage on the sides and under tail. Active like wood warbler; but bill and legs noticeably stout in comparison. Voice distinctive, reminiscent of scolding, with rapid *chewy-chewy chee*, *chewy-chewy jeeew*, with the *chee* sometimes rising in pitch slightly. Call a repeated *chee chee chee*.





## NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD

*Mimus polyglottos* (year-round).

Slender-bodied, long-tailed bird overtly similar to loggerhead shrike. Pale brown plumage above, whitish on breast and belly, with large white wing patch best seen in flight or when foraging, when the wing-patches are often flashed in apparent attempt to flush insect prey. Called mockingbird for a reason, as it imitates songs and calls of other species as well as man-made objects like cell phone ringers. Large repertoire, but species song contains varied phrases in series, each phrase repeated one to several times. Common and found throughout Midewin.



## COMMON YELLOWTHROAT

*Geothlypis trichas* (breeding). Small but stocky warbler more frequently heard than seen. Somewhat drab yet dimorphic, male is plain olive back with yellow throat and black mask from cheek to cheek. Female generally similar but lacks the black mask. Found commonly in brushy fields and hedgerows, and brushy edges of woodlands. Song rendered as *witchity wtchity witchity*. Call note a low *cheep*.



## BLUE GROSBEAK

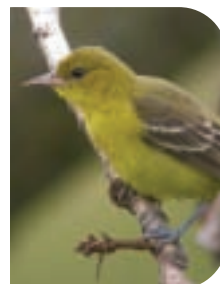
*Guiraca caerulea* (breeding). Looks like large indigo bunting (*Passerina cyanea*). Large bill, but otherwise sexually dimorphic, with male dark blue except for rufous wing-bars, and female pale gray-brown with buffy-brown wing-bars. Found in brushy areas with scattered trees. Appears to be increasing slowly at Midewin. Voice is a rich, husky warble, of short rising and falling phrases. Call note a sharp *chink*.

## ORCHARD ORIOLE

*Icterus spurius* (breeding).

One of the smaller orioles, sexually dimorphic after first year—females and males similar through first year; dull greenish back and yellowish belly, except male has black bib under bill. Second-year and older males are dark, with rump and under parts deep red or chestnut, black elsewhere. Note the two white wing bars. Song a fast, enthusiastic warble, interspersed with piping whistles and slurred notes. Quite common at Midewin.

As name suggests, found in grassy areas with scattered trees, and wood edges or corridors. Listen for the slurred *wheer* or *zheer* at end. Call a low *chut*.





### RED-HEADED WOODPECKER

*Melanerpes erythrocephalus* (year-round). A striking bird with bold plumage of bright red head, black upper back, white lower back, and black and white wings. Though not abundant, can be found in woody areas, particularly those with oaks. Contact call a wheezy *queerp*.



### RED-TAILED HAWK

*Buteo jamaicensis* (year-round). A large and commonly seen hawk, typically soaring and circling on ascending wind currents. Can be observed soaring over all habitats at Midewin. Often perches in trees within grasslands or along woodland-grassland edges. Adult has red tail. Often hunt and feed on snakes, which they can frequently be seen carrying.

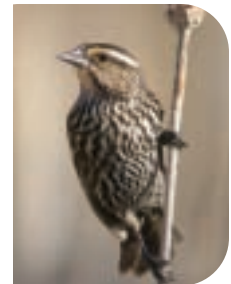
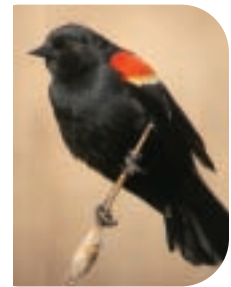


### SORA RAIL

*Porzana carolina* (breeding). More often seen than heard; dwells in marshes, particularly those with dense vegetation. Voice a decending whinny *ker-WEEeee-ee-ee-ee-ee*, or shorter; whistled *kerwee*, given by both sexes; alarm call a loud, sharp *keek*. Breeding adult has yellow, chicken-like bill and black facial pattern.

### RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

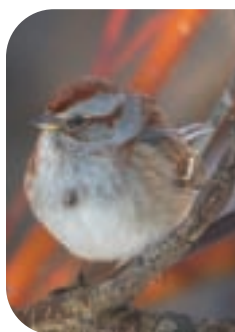
*Agelaius phoeniceus* (breeding). One of the most numerous bird species in North America, and monitoring shows it to be the most abundant bird at Midewin. A very early migrant in spring, flocking in large numbers upon arrival. Sexually dimorphic, with adult males shiny-black with red and yellow wing shoulder patches (may be concealed). Female streaky brown, faint red shoulder patch, and light stripe through eye. Song a loud, raspy *kon-ka-RHEEE*; call a loud *chek* or high *tseert*.





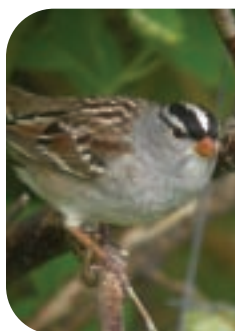
## ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK

*Buteo lagopus* (non-breeding). Larger than red-tail. In some winters, can be quite abundant, in others less so. Two color morphs, light and dark. Look for dark patches on undersides of wings.



## TREE SPARROW

*Spizella arborea* (non-breeding). Common winter resident in brushy fields in flocks. Note clear breast with central spot, rufous crown, bright white wing bars, and bi-colored bill. Sexes similar. Listen for a musical two-note twitter; the common vocalization in winter.



## WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW

*Zonotrichia leucophrys* (non-breeding). Pale gray bird with distinctive and attractive black and white head stripes found at Midewin only in the winter; often in large flocks in brushy and weedy fields. Birds in first winter have orange-pink bill, older birds have pink bill. Song, which can be heard in late spring, one or more plaintive whistles, suggesting an abbreviated white-throated sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) song, followed by husky, trilled whistles or buzzes. Call a sharp *pink*. Known in ornithology for its many dialects, song in this species is exceptionally well studied.

## Tips on using binoculars

Binoculars are an essential tool for bird watching. Although the general quality of binoculars has steadily increased over the last several decades, as with most optical equipment, you tend to get what you pay for. A very good set of binoculars can be purchased for \$200, but high end models can cost over \$1,000. Binoculars come in two basic designs: porro prism and roof prism. Either is fine and which a person prefers is a matter of taste.

Binoculars are described by magnification and the size of the objective lens (the lens opening farthest from the user's eyes). For example, binoculars may be described as 7 x 35, in which case the magnification of the image is 7 and the objective lens is 35 mm in diameter. Note that the ratio of these two numbers is 5 ( $35 = 7 \times 5$ ). The higher this ratio, the brighter the image will tend to be. Popular binoculars are 7 x 35, 8 x 30, and 10 x 40.

Two very important characteristics of binoculars are how closely they focus and the field of view. All else equal, a binocular that focuses more closely is preferable. Especially in dense vegetation, birds or butterflies may be close to the observer; and if the binocular can not focus at that distance, it is useless.

Field of view is how wide an area will be within the view at a particular distance. Binoculars with greater field of view increase the ease with which a bird (or other object) may be found when looking through the eye pieces. A useful technique is to find the bird with the naked eye; then, bring the binoculars to your eyes while maintaining focus on the bird. This takes some practice to do smoothly. It pays to practice before going into the field.



## Photo Credits

### **Jack Bartholmai**

Red-headed Woodpecker (12)

### **Mike Danzenbaker**, [www.avesphoto.com](http://www.avesphoto.com)

Northern Bobwhite (8)

Rough-legged Hawk (14)

Short-eared Owl (7)

### **Bill Glass**

Liatris (Cover)

Upland Sandpiper (4)

### **Rich Hickson**

Bell's Vireo (9)

Bobolink - male/female (6)

Dickcissel (5)

Eastern Meadowlark (5)

Field Sparrow (8)

Grasshopper Sparrow (4)

Henslow's Sparrow (6)

Killdeer (5)

Loggerhead Shrike (4)

Orchard Oriole - male/female (11)

Red-winged Blackbird - male/female (13)

Sedge Wren (6)

Song Sparrow (8)

Tree Sparrow (14)

White-crowned Sparrow (14)

Willow Flycatcher (9)

Yellow Throat (10)

### **Peter LaTourrette**, [www.birdphotography.com](http://www.birdphotography.com)

Blue Grosbeak (10)

Northern Harrier (7)

Northern Mockingbird (10)

Red-tailed Hawk (12)

Sora Rail (13)

### **Dan Stefanich**, [www.gammongroup.com](http://www.gammongroup.com)

Habitat (4, 5)

## References Used

*Birds of Illinois* by Sheryl Devore, Steven D. Bailey, and Gregory Kennedy, Lone Pine Publishing

*The Sibley Guide to Birds* by David Allen Sibley, Knopf

*Peterson Field Guide to Birds of Eastern and Central North America* by Roger Tory Peterson, Houghton-Mifflin

[www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/)

[www.americanbirding.org/index.html](http://www.americanbirding.org/index.html)

## Acknowledgements

Funding for this brochure was contributed by the Women of the Moose, Wilmington Chapter; ExxonMobil Foundation; CenterPoint Properties; National Forest Foundation; and Midewin Tallgrass Prairie Alliance.

